

Town & Country Planning (EIA) Regulations 2017
Secretary of State Screening Direction – Written Statement

Application name:	Land at North Farm, West End, Spetisbury
SoS case reference:	PCU/EIASC/D1265/3259906
Schedule and category of development:	Schedule 2 3a - Industrial installations for the production of electricity, steam and hot water

Full statement of reasons as required by 5(5)(a) of the 2017 EIA Regulations including conclusions on likelihood of significant environmental effects.

The Secretary of State has considered whether the above proposal is likely to have significant environmental effects. He has undertaken this screening taking into account the criteria set out in Schedule 3 of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017. In doing so he considers the main matters to be addressed are:

The Indicative thresholds contained in the EIA section of Planning Practice Guidance states that EIA is more likely to be required for schemes with a thermal output of more than 50 MW and that small stations using novel forms of generation should be considered carefully. It states that key issues to consider are the level of emissions to air, arrangements for the transport of fuel and any visual impact.

Schedule 3 selection criteria for Schedule 2 development refers:

Characteristics of development

The Secretary of State notes that the solar farm would have an installed generating capacity of 20 MW and would cover 29 hectares of undeveloped land. He has had regard to the council's opinion that the proposal constitutes major development in the countryside and that the site is located within a highly visually exposed area, with long distance views of the site from the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB likely to be possible, given the local topography and total scale of the proposed solar farm which amounts to 42ha (when considered cumulatively with existing adjacent 13 ha solar farm). He notes that the council considers that the features of the development are likely to appear incongruous and intrusive within a countryside setting, alongside the other solar farms in the vicinity of the site such as the approved 72ha solar farm approximately 1.4km to the southeast of the site. The Secretary of State has taken into account the developer's assertion that the site is naturally contained, with screening from long views obscured by natural topography and wooded areas and that this view is supported by the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment supporting the planning application. The Secretary of State notes that to mitigate the impact the proposals include the planting of a new hedgerow along the eastern boundary of the site and the management of the existing hedgerow to ensure it remains effective in screening wider views, although it appears that mitigation planting will not become fully established until 7 – 10 years into the project. The Secretary of State recognises a solar farm would introduce manmade structures into a rural location for the life-time of the scheme and that the impact increases when considered in cumulation with the existing solar farm at North Farm and the approved 72ha solar farm to the southeast. However, he considers that the main impact on the landscape would be visual. While the surrounding area includes AONBs, the site is not

itself located on land statutorily protected for its landscape or ecological value and he is not persuaded that a significant environmental effect is likely, necessitating the preparation of an environmental statement, for this reason in itself. He is satisfied that this matter could be handled by way of material supporting a planning application.

Having regard to the nature of the proposal and to all the information, the Secretary of State does not consider that a significant environmental effect is likely in terms of the use of natural resources, the production of waste, pollution and nuisance, the risks to human health or the risk of major accidents and/or disasters relevant to the development concerned.

Location of development

The Secretary of State notes that the site is not located in a sensitive area as defined by the 2017 EIA Regulations. He notes however that the surrounding landscape includes the Dorset AONB and Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB. As is mentioned above, the council considers that the site is located within a highly visually exposed area, with long distance views of the site from the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB likely to be possible, given the local topography and in cumulation with other solar farm development in the area. To help inform this screening direction, the Secretary of State sought the opinion of Natural England. Referring to the two AONBs, Natural England advised that it is concerned that the visual impacts are increased because in this area the local landscape character is open and rolling countryside, there are both local and more distant visual receptors and this is also one of a number of solar farms in close proximity. It considers the proposal needs to be carefully considered both in the light of its visual effects as well as the effects of landscape mitigation measures and the timescale over which these will become effective. It adds that moderation details need to be considered against the agreed effects taking account of the local expertise in the AONB and Council's landscape staff. For this reason, it suggests that the iterative approach offered by the EIA process is appropriate in this case.

The Secretary of State has also taken into account the views of the developer, who, referring to the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (including the addendum prepared in October 2020), considers that all theoretical viewpoints sit within blocks of woodland, sequential hedgerows, trees and scattered buildings. It considers it unlikely that any views towards the site from the AONBs would be apparent or if they do exist, they will be at such a distance that the proposal would be beyond normal visual perception without magnification.

Overall, on the basis of all the information, the Secretary of State recognises that there are differing opinions on the extent to which there will be views of the site from the AONBs and the impact on these in terms of the inter-visibility with other solar farm developments. However, while there may be some degree of visibility from the AONBs, the Secretary of State is not convinced that any impact on the designated features of AONBs would be of the magnitude necessary to suggest a significant environmental effect is likely. He considers that visual impact and the matters referred to by Natural England could be considered by material supporting a planning application, without subjecting the scheme to full EIA on this basis alone.

On the basis of all the information, the Secretary of State does not consider that populations of protected species would be affected to the extent that a significant environmental effect is likely.

In terms of heritage, while there are listed buildings and scheduled monuments in the surrounding area, on the basis of the information, the Secretary of State does not consider that a significant environmental effect is likely in respect of the impact on the features for which these heritage assets were designated.

Characteristics of potential impact

The Secretary of State recognises that a solar farm would introduce manmade structures into a rural location and that the impact increases when considered in cumulation with the existing solar farm at North Farm and the approved 72ha solar farm to the southeast. However, while there are differing opinions on the extent to which the scheme would be visible from the ANOBs and in other longer distance views, and on inter-visibility with other solar farms, the site is not in a sensitive area and he is not persuaded that the designated features for which the AONBs have been designated would be affected to the extent that a significant environmental effect is likely. The Secretary of State does not consider that this is a scheme where the intensity and complexity of any impact would be significant, in terms, for example, of public health or pollution and nuisance. He considers that the main impact would be visual and while the site is undeveloped, he is not persuaded that the impact on features designated for their importance to the natural or historic environment would be such to suggest that a significant environmental effect is likely. He is satisfied that visual impact could be considered by material supporting a planning application, without subjecting the scheme to full EIA on this basis alone. The Secretary of State considers that any impact would be for the life-time of the scheme, but that this would be reversible.

Is an Environmental Statement required?	No
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Date	19 November 2020